



Tropentag 2017, Bonn, Germany
September 20-22, 2017

Conference on International Research on Food Security, Natural Resource
Management and Rural Development
organised by the University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany

Food Sovereignty in rural Myanmar: a case study on drivers of agrarian transformation and impacts on small-scale farmers

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Agrarian transformation is one of the main goals of the government in Myanmar: Small-scale farmers are often struggling with these commercialization processes. Pro-business land reform and local power structures along with foreign investments in export-oriented, large-scale agriculture are undermining local food systems and customary land tenure rights pushing small-scale farmers into deeper poverty and wage-labor. The food sovereignty (FS) approach aims to return power and control over the food system to producers and consumers. This paper introduces the results of a field research which was conducted in two villages in southern Shan State and puts small-scale farmers and their struggles over land, food and rights at the center of discussion. Data was collected with a mixed-method approach and analyzed along three key factors, which are based on the components of the FS approach. Results show that farmers are forced to stay in a “circle of poverty”: Food insecurity is fostered by pro-business policies introduced by the government and external stakeholders who increasingly control local resources. It was found that the commercialization of agriculture plays an important role in the struggle of small-scale farmers. It is argued that the FS approach is an important contribution to somewhat radical thinking on development as it puts those at the heart of discussion who are undermined by neo-liberal policies and state-driven power relations.

Introduction

Despite extraordinary growth rates and increasing FDI, Myanmar remains one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia. Agriculture is the main livelihood source for the majority of the population. Since the long awaited beginning of the democratization process and the economic opening of the country in recent years, the government prioritizes the agricultural sector as the main source of economic growth and aims to alleviate poverty with a strategy that promotes commercialization, export-orientation and large-scale production schemes (Myanmar Agribusiness Investment Summit, 2014). This paper explores how the food sovereignty (FS) of small-scale farmers is influenced by agricultural transformation. Although small-scale farmers are the backbone of the agricultural sector, research results show that they are often disadvantaged by government reforms and policies. FS claims arose from criticizing increasing global inequality, poverty, hunger and malnutrition. With its “integral capital’s dialectic” (McMichael, 2013), FS advocates these developments in the light of corporate control, market-driven economies and neoliberal policies.

Material and Methods

Following the approach of FS and its interlinked components (Akram-Lodhi, 2013), the research design is based on three key factors: food security² and farming situation, access to land, and

¹ This research was financially supported by PROMOS (BMBF/DAAD).

² The FS discourse engages critically with the differences between the concepts of food security and FS. Wittman, 2011 remarks that FS is a “critical alternative to the concept of food security”. From a FS perspective, food security sees food as a commodity rather than a right and hunger as a result of insufficient trade rather than a problem of access privileges and power (Wittman, 2011). In this paper, household food security is used as a factor to explore problems in the research context.

migration and labor. Particular emphasis is put on control over assets, localized food systems, and the focus on food for people, which are three major components of the FS approach. Data was collected in May and June 2015 in two rural communities (V1 and V2) in Hsi Hseng Township in the district of Taunggyi in Southern Shan State³. The villages (population: V1=456, V2=254⁴) represent both upland and lowland, which are two major land use areas in Myanmar (Figure 1). The field research used a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative methods were taken from the *Participatory Rural Appraisal* tool box and included transect walks, community mapping and gender-disaggregated seasonal calendars and focus group discussions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female villagers (n=11), key-informants from the township (n=5) and government officials (township level, n=2). A household survey (n=60) was conducted in both research villages. The survey was carried out with the help of trained enumerators and followed the three key factors of the research design.

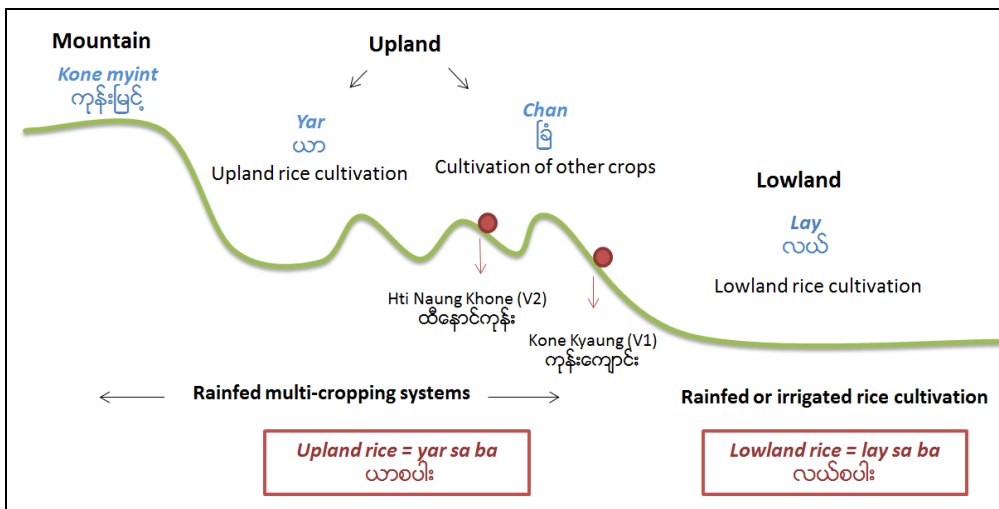


Figure 1: Land use areas and location of the research sites (own design)

Results and Discussion

Both research villages are part of a local food system. Farmers are producing in subsistence agriculture and are selling some of their crops within a regional 5-day-market system. Research results show that the current food system plays a vital role for farmer’s food and nutrition security. In both villages about 80% of the respondents indicated to sell crops on the local markets on a regular basis. In V1, 75% of the female respondents indicated to purchase vegetables from the market at least one time per week. The results of the community maps and seasonal calendars show a highly diversified and heterogeneous land use in both research villages. Next to upland and lowland rice, which is the staple food, a great number of crops were identified, including spices (e.g. turmeric, ginger) and vegetables and fruit (e.g. peanuts, banana, corn, tomato). However, a majority of households in both villages were found to be seasonally food insecure between four to six months a year. Food insecurity is clearly linked to the cycle of rice planting and harvesting. The months of food insecurity fall right before the rice harvest, which shows the dependence on rice and the great importance of land access and security. Evidence suggests that instead of weak agricultural practice, insufficient access to land is the major cause for seasonal food insecurity. In both research villages, farmers stated to be satisfied with the quality and quantity of their rice harvest, but do not have enough land to be *rice secure* year round.

³ The field research was conducted in co-operation with the local NGO *METTA Development Foundation*. The author would like to thank the organization for their support throughout the research.

⁴ Source: *METTA Development Foundation* 2015

Increasing land pressure was identified as a major challenge for farmers. About half of the polled households own land. The traditional land tenure system allows landless households to cultivate on community land. However, newly introduced land laws are not protecting customary land laws and are favoring large-scale cultivation. In 2012, land became a commodity and must be formerly registered with the government. Otherwise, it can be allocated to foreign and domestic investors (Franco et al., 2015). Nowadays, landless farmers, who would like to own and register land, often cannot afford it, as findings suggest. A male farmer stated: *“The land situation has changed dramatically. Five years ago farmers could just cultivate anywhere, but now land is becoming scarce. I simply have not enough capital to buy and register land.”* Also farmers, who own land by customary land law, are increasingly facing problems because of the costly and time-consuming formal land registration process. Findings show that 40% of land owners in V1 and 85% in V2 do not own a government certificate for their land yet. One male farmer stated: *„We own our land for a long time, maybe 26 years. It didn't have a high value at that time. But now it changed. We don't own any certificate for our land yet. The government asked for money in advance. But we don't get any paper, so people [in the village] don't want to apply anymore.”* Another female farmer added: *“I don't know how to apply. Last year they [the government] came and showed a sheet to our village people, but how to understand?”* Findings show that increasing agricultural commercialization is further fostering land pressure.

Corn and sugar cane cultivation were identified as the major drivers of commercialization in the research area. Both crops are priority crops of the Myanmar government (Myanmar Agribusiness Investment Summit, 2014) and thus attractive for large-scale and export-oriented commercial production. In close proximity to V1, large-scale sugar cane plantations have led to increasing land pressure and major land losses for farmers. The production of sugar cane is tied to a complex situation of ethnic politics, which is favored by national pro-business policies. According to farmers, a local governance organization took away land from the village in 2006 and started growing sugar cane without legal cause. A large area of land, which formerly belonged to farmers in V1 is nowadays used for sugar cane production.

Export-oriented corn cultivation has increasing importance in the uplands of Shan State. The company CP⁵ started corn contract farming in the 1990s in Shan State, seeking cheaper production costs and new consumption markets (Woods, 2015). Corn cultivation and contract farming are actively promoted by government institutions. At the land management department it was stated that *“the government encourages the farmers in this township [His Hseng] to choose corn, because it is a high-yielding hybrid crop”*. Farmers in V2 reported that they cultivated high-yielding hybrid corn seeds from CP in 2011 for the first time. According to the farmers, they were promised high yields, but were disappointed. In addition to the high prices for seeds, which have to be purchased for every crop cycle, farmers are increasingly dependent on the cash-crop economy and often have to sell their yield for a low price immediately after harvest in order to have enough capital. A female farmer stated: *“Today, there is corn everywhere. We don't grow as many different crops as before. How can I have enough food for my family like this? We sell the harvest to the company and then we spend the money to buy seeds”*.

Daily labor and temporary cross-border migration to Thailand were identified as the major coping strategies to meet livelihood needs. About 40% of the female respondents work in daily farm labor to earn additional household income. However, findings suggest that people are mostly working on uphill poppy⁶ fields rather than on the surrounding sugar cane plantations. One female respondent specified: *“In the poppy fields I can work for 5 months every day. Here [downhill] it's not busy and difficult to find a job.”* Although plantations are labor-intensive, work opportunities are limited due to seasonality. Furthermore, interview partners stated that wages on

⁵ CP – Charoen Pokphand Group of Thailand

⁶ Poppy cultivation is illegal in Myanmar, but still practiced in many uphill communities in Shan State.

the sugar cane plantations are low compared to those on the poppy fields. Cross-border migration was identified as another important coping strategy. Thailand is pulling migrant workers due to its geographic proximity to Myanmar, large supply of low-skilled jobs and relatively lax migration policies (McGann, 2013). 40% of respondents in V1 and 30% in V2 indicated to have family members who migrated to the neighboring country. The lack of land and capital, which is linked to increasing commercial agriculture, forces people to migrate in order to earn remittances. Due to weak migration policies, migrants run at risk to face trafficking and exploitation in Thailand (Hall, 2012; McGann, 2013).

Conclusions and Outlook

The findings of this research show that the FS of small-scale farmers in the research context is highly endangered. Food insecurity is fostered by increasing land pressure due to large-scale commercial production. The increasing monoculture in the region is not only a threat for local variety diversity and biodiversity, but can also impacts nutrition security. Evidence suggests that the current local food system has the potential to offer a balanced diet. New policies and laws should therefore find ways to strengthen the capacities of local food systems. The current approach of the government leads to a constant reinforcement of a poverty circle and the proletarianization of the peasantry. Resources such as land, seeds and territory are increasingly controlled by external stakeholders (e.g. private investors) and small-scale farmers more and more dependent on the cash-crop economy, wage-labor and remittances. Furthermore, traditional land tenure systems are undermined by pro-business legal frameworks, which do not take into account that customary tenure systems are highly dynamic and adapted to fit local conditions. Potential positive outcomes of commercialization are undermined because of missing pro-peasant policies. FS, as part of the global development discourse, offers a chance to engage with radical thinking on agrarian development under capitalism as the approach (re)politicizes the debate (Ehlert and Voßemer, 2015). In addition, FS should be advocated to become an integral part of the growing civil society in Myanmar.

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